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ANALYSIS

Russia and Ukraine in Kremlin Rhetoric

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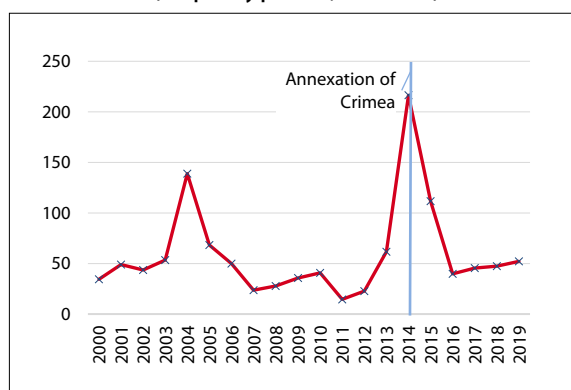
Two key events—the annexation of Crimea and the war in eastern Ukraine—have significantly influenced the policies of Russia and Russia's relations with Ukraine, Europe, and the US. However, they only play an episodic role in Russia's official narrative—a clear sign of the deliberate discrepancy between politics and the rhetoric of the Russian state.

The figures in this article present how often the official Kremlin website refers to specific topics. Using the tool developed by dekodeer, we generated several graphic representations of word use frequency by Putin (2000–2008 and 2012–2020) and Dmitry Medvedev (2008–2012). The figures depict the occurrence of a word or a combination of words per 100,000 words.

Ukraine and Ukrainian

The Russian president only talks about Ukraine during crises—first in the context of the Orange Revolution in 2004, when mass protests prevented Russian-backed presidential candidate Viktor Yanukovich from manipulating the election result. Then there was the Euromaidan protests of 2013–2014, to which Russia responded by annexing Crimea and supporting the separatists in Donbass. Russian state television continues to regularly question Ukraine's state sovereignty. Thus, President Putin only feels the need to take up this issue himself during the actual moment of crisis.

Figure 1: Use of the Terms "Ukraina" (Ukraine) and "ukrain-skii" (Ukrainian) in Presidential Statements 2000–2019 (frequency per 100,000 words)



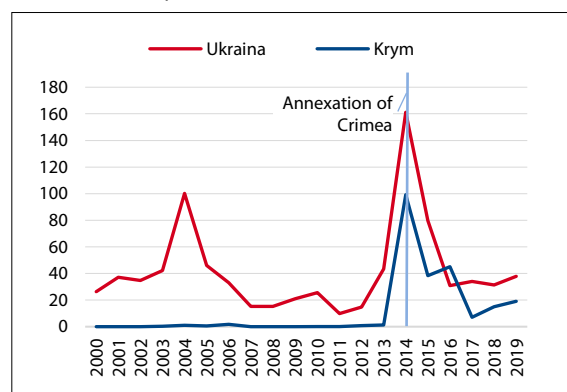
Source: <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts>, analyzed by dekodeer (<https://putin.dekodeer.org/words>; (in German) <https://putin.dekodeer.org/nationalitaeten>).

Ukraine and Crimea

The 2014 annexation of Crimea came as a surprise to both Russian society and the international commu-

nity. The official Kremlin rhetoric reflects this fact: the Crimean peninsula was barely mentioned before 2014. Although the plan for the annexation had been drawn up for some time, the decision to make it a reality in February 2014 was not preceded by a propaganda campaign in Russia. It was only with the annexation that Crimea became a key element in Russia's self-representation.

Figure 2: Use of the Term "Ukraina" (Ukraine) Compared to the Use of the Term "Krym" (Crimea) in Presidential Statements 2000–2019 (frequency per 100,000 words)



Source: <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts>, analyzed by dekodeer (<https://putin.dekodeer.org/words>; (in German) <https://putin.dekodeer.org/nationalitaeten>).

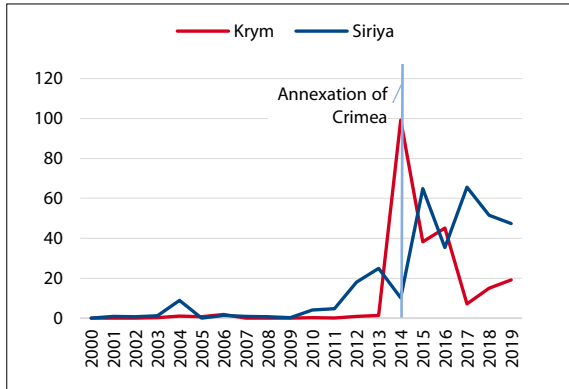
Crimea and Syria

Despite the central importance of the annexation of Crimea for Russia's domestic and foreign policy, direct references to Crimea in the official rhetoric have faded quickly. Crimea does not disappear completely from the Kremlin narrative, but from 2017 its presence hovers around a low baseline level. On the other hand, the importance of Syria in Russian foreign policy becomes paramount and is frequently referred to in the official rhetoric.

Crimean Tatars

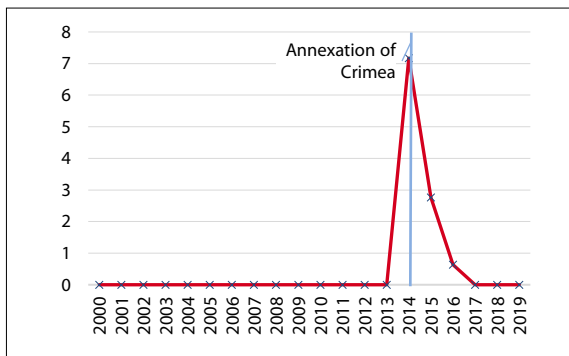
For Russia, the Crimean Tatars remain the most difficult aspect of the annexation of Crimea. Their territorial claim to Crimea is closely linked to the memory of their deportation under Stalin and their return to the peninsula after 1991. In 2014, Crimean Tatars were prominent protesters against the annexation. Since then, they have been a major target of Russian repression: Crimean Tatar organizations and media have been banned. It is there-

Figure 3: Use of the Term “Krym” (Crimea) Compared to the Use of the Term “Siriya” (Syria) in Presidential Statements 2000–2019 (frequency per 100,000 words)



Source: <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts>, analyzed by *dekoder* (<https://putin.dekoder.org/words>; (in German) <https://putin.dekoder.org/nationalitaeten>).

Figure 4: Use of the Terms “krymsko-tatarskii” and “krymskotatarskii” (Crimean Tatar (adjective)) 2000–2019 (frequency per 100,000 words)



Source: <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts>, analyzed by *dekoder* (<https://putin.dekoder.org/words>; (in German) <https://putin.dekoder.org/nationalitaeten>).

fore in Russia’s interest to mention the Crimean Tatars as little as possible in presidential speeches.

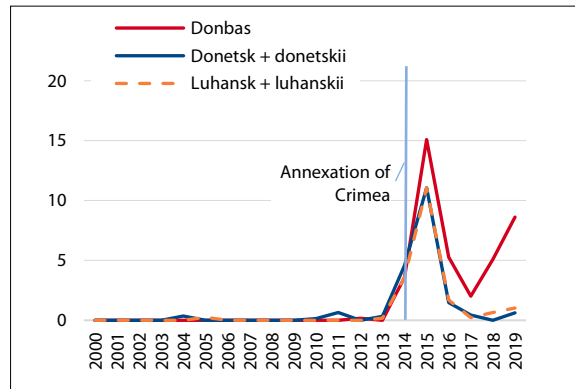
Donbas

The war in the Donbas, which began in the aftermath of the annexation of Crimea, is also rarely mentioned in Russia’s official rhetoric. With a certain time lag—the war began in the first half of 2014—the central locations “Donbas”, “Donetsk” and “Luhansk” are mentioned somewhat more frequently in 2015, but then drop off quickly. The actual frequency of the word “Donbas” behind the subsequent slight increase in visibility remains low. The official Russian narrative denies Russia’s involvement in this war; consequently Russia only refers to the region occasionally.

About the Author

Gwendolyn Sasse is the Director of the Centre for East European and International Studies (ZOiS) in Berlin.

Figure 5: Use of the Term “Donbas” Compared to the Use of the Terms “Donetsk” / “Donetskii” and “Luhansk” / “Luhanskii” in Presidential Statements 2000–2019 (frequency per 100,000 words)

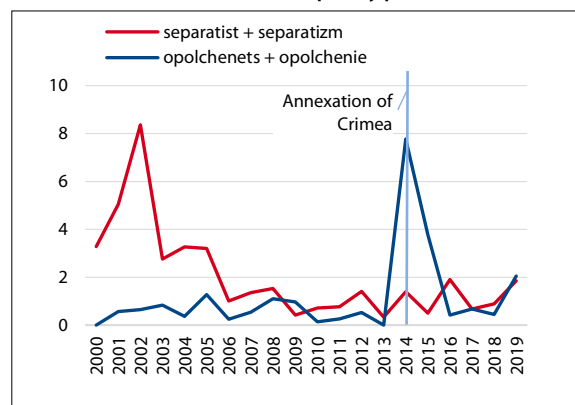


Source: <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts>, analyzed by *dekoder* (<https://putin.dekoder.org/words>; (in German) <https://putin.dekoder.org/nationalitaeten>).

Separatism

The Russian president also avoids references to “separatist” and “separatism” in relation to the Donbas—in order to distinguish them from the Chechen separatists who figured prominently in earlier presidential rhetoric. With regard to the Donbas, Putin tends to use the term “people’s militias,” which suggests a greater degree of legitimacy from below.

Figure 6: Use of the Terms “separatist” / “separatizm” (separatist / separatism) Compared to the Use of the Terms “opolchenets” / “opolchenie” (people’s militiaman / people’s militia) in Presidential Statements 2000–2019 (frequency per 100,000 words)



Source: <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts>, analyzed by *dekoder* (<https://putin.dekoder.org/words>; (in German) <https://putin.dekoder.org/nationalitaeten>).